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THE "FAST SET" AT HARVARD.

THE title of this article is borrowed from a writer in the NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW for November, who signs himself Aleck Quest. In this article Mr. Quest announces that he thinks it well "to give to the public a fair presentation of the facts as they are." From this I supposed that Mr. Quest intended to make such a gift to the public (since he thinks well of it); and I sat down prepared to read an account of my friends and myself which would be unflattering, no doubt, but difficult to disavow. I was surprised to see so little that I recognized in this picture, that far from being photographic, I failed to find it even a good caricature. But only we "fast men," who sat for the portrait, can know how little of a likeness it is. The public, grateful for Mr. Quest's gift to it, may be warned on a false alarm; and, for the sake of my college, I feel a desire, not so much to draw a picture as to criticise the one before me on general principles, which I hope most people will admit to be general principles, and show in that manner the falseness of the drawing.

In the position that he takes, Mr. Quest has the advantage of me. His article is written with a precision of statement, a fertility of statistics, a familiarity with the details of the life of the fast Harvard man which seem the result of a thorough experience of that life itself. An outsider, however observant he were, could hardly know so much. Yet Mr. Quest at the same time reveals himself as an undoubted moralist, deploring the present state of things, earnestly anxious that it should be otherwise. I cannot give so fair an account of myself, and must confess at once that I have no claim to be counted among the moralists. My lot was cast with the fast set, and I have never undergone a reform. I belonged to their societies and shared actively in their doings. To some of Mr.

Quest's charges I plead guilty at the start. Those of us who had money to spend, spent it in ways that were often not the best ways. We were extravagant; at times riotous, like all young animals, from puppies up; and we were not particularly innocent by gaslight. But that we were the disgrace not only to our college but to our decency and manhood that Mr. Quest's "fast set" seems to have been and to be, I totally deny. My experience was not so terrible as was Mr. Quest's. Had it been, I should heartily agree with him that the rich young man at Harvard is a most evil blot on the college 'scutcheon. For the utter disparity between Mr. Quest's experience and mine I cannot at all account, yet we must have been at Harvard at very much the same period. He says there are upwards of two thousand men at Cambridge, and one "fast man" in every twenty of these. Adopting these figures, there must be only between twenty and thirty of the species during any one year. (I pass over a paragraph in which Mr. Quest counts them at a hundred without referring to his previous ratio, because I think between twenty and thirty is what my own experience has taught me.) That is not a large number to know about, yet I did not meet the men Mr. Quest met. I was one of the band for several years, and new men came, and old men went. Therefore I was furnished with a panorama on which could be painted much vice such as Mr. Quest pictures so vividly. But I say, I never witnessed anything that approached the violent and revolting hue of excess and dishonor that Mr. Quest has been so unfortunate as to see.

Before saying anything more directly about Harvard, I am going to venture some generalities upon colleges and college life (stale no doubt, but I must risk that), because if I can succeed in persuading any reader to agree with me, even partially, I shall have broken the way to clearing my college, in his eyes, of any reproach peculiar to itself apart from other colleges, and to showing him that the "fast set" at Harvard is, perhaps, not always the collection of jail-birds that it was when Mr. Quest moved among the students.

I start on the same line with Mr. Quest.

The larger any college grows, the more of the great world outside is it bound to contain. There is no sieve to separate the wheat from the tares. It becomes much like a city, between whose citizens no law can well discriminate so long as they keep

their doings to themselves. Its community shares much of the good and the bad that you will find in any other gathering of men. The members may lack a certain discretion that comes by living, but they own a certain ingenuousness that living filches away from them only too often. Barring these, they are simply young men dwelling together as a class, instead of being filtered in with men of all ages. They are pursuing what is called their *education*. There is no use in stopping to define that word ; for some fathers send their sons to college to learn many things out of both books and companions—to get in short a working equipment for intelligent citizenship, while other fathers send their sons to acquire some specialties, such as Greek, or social position. The college cannot tell what they have come for. All it can do is to make laws and punish those who break them. But why should any one be surprised to find that college law-breakers go unpunished, when the same spectacle goes on under his eyes every day in the case of all other law-breakers ? Does he expect the framers of college codes and the officers of college courts to be more perfect in administering justice than all other administrators ? Why should they be ? They are merely men, merely what the sheriff and the judge are anywhere else in the world.

Since the average of students is an average likely to lack the discretion spoken of above, some supervision of these young men's comings and goings is obviously necessary. But how much and of what sort this supervision shall be must be left an unanswered question. England locks up her undergraduate at midnight. Germany cares not if he visit the Holy Land or Mozambique. America adopts a middle course, with local variations. Well, what is the result ? Do you find your young Englishman less of a sinner than his brother at Bonn or Heidelberg ? And are we young Americans not so wicked as the young Teutons, but down in the moral scale when weighed against an Oxford man ? I do not imagine that any one will contend the characteristics of the male human, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, differ according to the country in which he goes to school, except in trivial matters, of which there is no question here. I do not remember to have heard any traveler assert that in such and such a nation he had found angels more angelic, or devils more diabolic, than the angels and the devils of his home. It may be shortly said, that the great mass of young men of an active temperament

will do some things that are not good for them. You may collect them in college, you may disperse them in a town, you may even sequester them in rural districts; but treat them as you will, you can, at most, place restraints on their conduct which they will elude more or less successfully, and the day will come when these restraints must go. When they go, you have not tided over a dangerous period which has its definite limit; you have only impeded and retarded certain tendencies which are bound to assert themselves sooner or later. That is the kind of animal the young man is. You cannot prevent him from being like himself. He has been so since his earliest existence in the history of the human race. So let it be admitted that the young man is commonly not what may be called perfectly *good* in a religious sense, and that he has never been made so and kept so yet by any system his elders have been able to devise. When you come to discuss colleges it is futile to disguise this truth. Such fundamental facts must be acknowledged before it is possible to speak reasonably about college life.

Now, a college is a collection of young men of many different characters and tastes, yet the most of these young men closely resemble one another in certain radical ways. But when one finishes reading Mr. Quest, somehow for the moment it seems, granting he is correct, that Harvard students cannot be like other students, and that after such revelations a parent would be criminally unwise to trust his boy in such a place. What a burden of sin must the Harvard Faculty have on their heads! for, of course, it is this neglect of supervision that has caused such a state of things.

To deal with the moral side of young men becomes a question of how best a faculty may curb and direct the inevitable turbulence over which it presides. Harvard is accused of insufficient curbing and directing, hence the blackness of its undergraduate life as compared with that of other American colleges. First, assuming this alleged discrepancy to be true, I will point out to the reader (returning to what I said about law-breakers) that you will find more unpunished law-breakers in a community of fifty thousand than you will in one of two thousand. But I do not for one moment admit that Harvard undergraduates are blacker than other undergraduates.

Harvard is a bigger place than Yale, or Princeton, or Trinity.

Boston is a bigger place than New Haven, Trenton, or Hartford. But does any one think that therefore there is not the same sort of market for young purses to be found in these smaller towns? and is it to be reasonably imagined that any restraint short of imprisonment stops the young purses from making purchases? Trinity is Episcopalian; Princeton, Presbyterian; Yale, Congregationalist; while Harvard is of no sect. But I have yet to find that form of dogma or strictness of parental supervision materially vary the conduct of the undergraduates at those places. To make the students *good* in the religious sense is what colleges of a more paternal government undertake and fail to do; and what Harvard is blamed for not doing. I assert that the experiment fails wherever it is attempted; and I assert it because when I have intimately met "fast" students from Trinity, Princeton, Yale, or Columbia, I found that they took pleasure in eating the same forbidden fruits that tempted our palates in Boston. We did not differ a jot in our notions of enjoyment. To finish these generalities, I will say, that let a college life be a good thing on the whole or a bad thing on the whole, you find the young man who stays away from one as a rule not a whit more innocent by gas light than the average undergraduate. It is not Harvard or Yale, but Nature, that is the matter with him.

If I displease any parent who may read this, it is because I have told what is (I believe) the truth about all college communities, and, indeed, all communities of young men wherever they are gathered together. And, since I believe it to be irresistible as any natural law, I do not stop to wish it could be otherwise, particularly as I notice so vast a majority of these wild and shocking spirits grow up to be good husbands and good members of society—like their fathers.

But to return to Mr. Quest and his "fast set."

We answered his description in some respects. Most of us were well off; some, indeed, had incomes much greater than any that he names. Many of us had too much money to spend, therefore, and were idle in consequence—though those of us who failed to get their degrees were few and far between. We played poker, we frequented the comic operas, some of us imagined ourselves experienced judges of wine, we were not always sober, and we were to be seen and heard where Mr. Quest has so minutely located us. I am not writing for maidens and boys.

I am discussing permanent facts, and in so doing make a pretty large admission of shortcomings. But, self-confessed, I am not at all afraid of a jury of my peers. Will many men in the world, whether they live in a palace or in a tenement house, sincerely feel that my disclosures have shocked their ideas of human nature?

But from reading Mr. Quest's article through there seems to be a stain left on one's mind—a stain of vulgarity, debauchery, and dishonesty. I am truly sorry that Mr. Quest has been condemned to observe such evil company, and I cannot understand how he managed it. In truth, I would ask my contemporaries at Harvard if any of them, be they poor, rich, prominent, or recluse, knew of a set of twenty or thirty such low-minded and childish cowards, the contemplation of whom Mr. Quest was compelled to endure. I am not afraid of their answers. I would trust to say "No" even the jealous and disappointed men who looked on us sourly because we seemed to them more blest than we deserved. Did they find us every night (such is the implication of Mr. Quest) emerging from society rooms, let loose "to the utter dismay of the neighbors"? Were we continually before the police on charges to meet of which "most young men would be ashamed"? Friends of mine have been arrested for fast driving, noise, breaking lamp-posts, and stealing signs. I don't know that this was very creditable. They had much better have left the lamp-posts and the signs alone. But are these the charges most young men would be ashamed to meet? Such a dark hint as that inevitably fills the uninformed reader's mind with surmises that begin far beyond where the worst of those offences leaves off. Disgraceful things have happened at Harvard. Mr. Quest instances a few, but where is the candid Harvard man, or Cambridge policeman for that matter, who would pretend they were the ordinary every-day thing? But that such is the case is what Mr. Quest's way of putting things inevitably leads the reader to conclude. The society Mr. Quest censures does not commit these offences each night, though, as I said, one would suppose so from the article. That society meets once a week during a part of the autumn, has two meetings in the spring, and gives three theatrical entertainments during the year. It has been complained of. The stock argument in its favor is that the students who are going to drink too much and cannot be prevented, had better do

it off by themselves, and not in public bar rooms. There are many answers to such an argument, but this article is not the place for a discussion. But let not the reader imagine that Harvard is alone in having this society and similar ones in her midst. They abound in nine-tenths of our American colleges.

Did our class-mates think that most of us cheated at cards? For after cataloguing our other vices somewhat over generously, Mr. Quest finds that we are widely open to this accusation, and that we come near to acknowledging its truth with indifference if not with satisfaction. Mr. Quest has one paragraph which is laughable in the ferocity of its exaggeration. There must be, if he is to be credited, several hundred gamblers in the Harvard community of two thousand odd, one-half of whom are so accomplished at cheating that a gambling hell in Boston is a safer place to risk one's money in. I am tempted to leave such a statement to be its own refutation. Nevertheless, I will say that in my experience I remember not six cases of cheating at cards. Of course, there were more that I did not hear of. Of course in a community of more than two thousand men from all over the country, one must expect to find examples of the liar and the thief. But if we accept Mr. Quest's estimate, Cambridge contains a population numerically worse and more dangerous than most of the Western mining settlements. The few men that were accused of cheating that I know of personally, have never recovered from the blow it gave to their reputation. I have assisted at many games of poker at Harvard, and I have often seen foolish men lose more than they could afford. But I do not call to mind any "ghastly faces," and I did not hear many "curses loud and deep at ill luck." A man who cursed so much as all that during a game would have been a nuisance, and no one would have played with him.

But these are paltry details. I did not begin this reply to Mr. Quest with the view of contradicting him in the items of his facts. No doubt he has seen more of this horrible life than I have, and no doubt my tamer notion of Harvard extravagances is merely a result of my own individual experience. But then, that is all that Mr. Quest's can be. So here you have two accounts; one by a moralist, the other by a self-confessed offender. I greatly fear the moralist has the advantage over me with the multitude, for to the multitude sensation is so pleasant an enjoy-

ment. They will find the grisly games of chance, the ocean of I. O. U's in which Harvard is weltering, the ghastly faces, the enraged police, and the dismayed neighbors, of an interest more pungent than my paler effects. Mr. Quest is fortunate in being able to give to the public a fair presentation of the "facts as they are," and yet produce a composition which contains all the romantic splendor of the dime novel. That I fall so far below him I cannot help. I saw nothing of this, and I am trying to tell what I did see during my several years of life with the fast set.

The truth of the matter really is that Mr. Quest has not described a class or body of men that exists at Harvard at all. He has described a *type of man*, an individual, whose twin brother I have seen hailing from Yale, Princeton and many other institutions of learning. We at Harvard are familiar with him. I have seen several specimens in my time. He becomes pretty well known and pretty generally thought ill of by the end of his first year. He seldom finishes his course. Either he is requested to leave or he leaves of his own accord, disappointed in his social ambitions, and so reft of the goal he came to win. He is, of course, rich, and is sometimes generous. His fatal mistake is in thinking that money will do the trick for him. He is the cause of much of the wrath that descends upon Harvard from the popular press, whose writers take no note of the scores of young Harvard graduates who are at this moment working hard and successfully in responsible positions all over the United States. Many of these same workers belonged to the fast set. Were it permissible I could name them. Could outsiders only realize how utterly money is left out of all questions of undergraduate success at Harvard, and how many men of most modest income reach the highest social honors their friends can give them, heartily supported by the fast set; could outsiders hear the continual and prevailing ridicule that is heaped on such men as Mr. Quest has so painfully described,—they would get a different notion about Harvard.

Though Mr. Quest once or twice points out that he is describing only a small set, you are left with the impression that Harvard college is alive with such vermin. But Mr. Quest has not even described a set.

We are glad we are rich; we would rather be so than not.

We are no better in our lives than other men of our age have been or will be, and we are no worse. Undoubtedly we do not get as much out of our books as we should. But I ask the reader who cares to know something about Harvard men to pause awhile before he makes up his mind, and to consider the Harvard men whom he knows, who are working steadily away in the towns of the east and west ; or those Harvard men from 1860 to 1865 (many of them straight from the fast set) who, by their lives and deaths, set a halo about the venerable head of their mother college that she will wear always ; and then let the reader ask himself if it is probable as a scientific fact that the present generation has in twenty-five years sped on so rapidly from that high pinnacle of courage and honor to a decadence which places it at once (if we are to believe Mr. Quest) among the criminal classes.

ONE OF THE FAST SET.